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A Voyage of the Omaha

The navigation of the Missouri River played no small part in the building of Iowa towns, especially Council Bluffs and Sioux City. Even before western Iowa was settled, the fur trade was responsible for considerable river traffic. The name of the American Fur Company was prominent in most of the early Missouri River expeditions, but as the frontier of the fur traders was superseded by homesteads the steamboat trade came to cater more and more to the transportation of settlers and the supplies of civilization.

The decade from 1850 to 1860 witnessed the rapid settling of western States, the reopening of the slavery dispute by the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the intensified California and Oregon immigration, and the Pike's Peak episode — all of which contributed thousands of travellers to the western trails. Large numbers of people affected by these events came to St. Louis or Jefferson City by rail and there took the steamboat packets to some convenient cross-country starting point on the Missouri River. On this account enterprising little river villages grew into important marts of commerce. Of the Iowa towns, Council Bluffs was the first to command a large share of the river traffic, but after 1856 Sioux City began to demand better and more constant

steamboat service, so that by 1859 there were at least a half dozen regular packets working the Sioux City trade. The most famous and most faithful of the Sioux City boats during the fifties was the steamer *Omaha*.

Missouri River steamboats of the *Omaha* type were the pride of the western waters. Although they were not as large as the Mississippi River steamers they were fully as well equipped and were mechanically as perfect. The splendid passenger steamers during the golden age of Missouri River steamboating were properly described as "floating palaces". They cost as much as thirty thousand dollars. Some of them were equipped with as many as forty-six staterooms, all comfortably appointed and finished in fine style. The cabins were furnished with Brussels carpets. Convenient mirrors provided the young swains of the day with ample opportunity to take full stock of their personal appearance. Each steamboat of the better passenger type had a nursery for the use of small children. In ornamentation some of the boats were unique, even rivalling the famous *Western Engineer*. Gilding seems to have been the most prominent characteristic in the art of steamboat decoration and the curious pride of many a workman was exhibited in the construction of the Missouri River steamers. A boat that did not meet the standards of the times could not hope for a large share of the commerce of that river.

Almost as much attention was paid to the entertainment of passengers as to their physical comfort. Many of the steamboats were equipped with a piano and some boasted a string orchestra. The decks were thronged every evening, while the young people danced the Virginia reel, the polka, and perhaps the daring waltz. The convivial bartender no doubt contributed his share to the gaiety of social life on board. In the cabins, Pike's Peakers and hardy frontiersmen made and lost fortunes at poker.

The *Omaha*, like the other Missouri River packets, prospered from the Pike's Peak migration. A large part of the up-bound freight consisted of the prospective gold miners' equipment. Mr. Wilcox, the clerk of the *Omaha*, recommended the following outfit: "100 lbs. of flour, 2 bbls. of whiskey, 50 lbs. bacon, 49 gallons of whiskey, 100 lbs. of venison, 18 demi-johns of whiskey, 2 boxes herring, 1 bbl. whiskey, 1 bbl. crackers, 55 gallons whiskey, 3 bbl. pickles, $\frac{3}{8}$ bbl. whiskey, 12 quart mugs." He further explained, in the light of experience by "one who has been thar", that a little more whisky might be required but that the other articles should hold out.

Officers and crew on the Missouri packets exerted every effort to attract patronage. No abler and probably no more popular steamboatman navigated the river than Captain Andrew Wineland who commanded the *Omaha*. He enjoyed the reputation of being one of the squarest and most courageous men who ever measured wits with the fickle Missouri.

One beautiful spring day in March, 1859, the gangway of the *Omaha* presented an animated scene quite in accord with the general hurly-burly all along the wharf at St. Louis. Deck hands were hustling to and fro with freight, passengers were finding their quarters on board, and Pike's Peakers were making frantic last-minute preparations for their journey to the golden El Dorado.

It was the heyday of river traffic and the steam marine of the St. Louis wharf presented a solid mass of boats extending for more than a mile along the river front. Huge piles of freight cluttered the wharf. Each steamboat was the center of a whirlpool of activity.

For days in advance the officers of the *Omaha* had advertised ample accommodations on their first trip of the season to the village of Sioux City far up the Missouri. At last, after much bustle and confusion and several postponements, everything was declared ready and on the evening of March 24th Captain Wineland rang the bell as a signal to cast off. After the first day of their thousand-mile voyage up the turbid Missouri the weather changed from cool to chilly, from chilly to raw, from raw to cold, and the eighth day ended in an old fashioned northeast snow-storm. By that time the *Omaha* had reached Brownsville. The snow that fell every day thereafter for more than a week added greatly to the normal difficulties of wooding, avoiding snags, and skirting sandbars.

After a stormy voyage of eighteen days the *Omaha* wharved at Council Bluffs where sleighs were in waiting to carry the passengers to town. The river was out of its banks at this point and the Platte a few miles below was shooting out large chunks of ice which spread all over the Missouri River bottom. With the painstaking care and wizardry of a Missouri River pilot Captain Wineland had directed his gallant craft through the floating ice. Uncanny skill was required to steer the boat up the Missouri under the most favorable conditions, beset as it was by innumerable snags and constantly shifting sandbars. It is said that "Uncle Davy", one of the most noted of Missouri River pilots, not only remembered the exact location of sandbars on former trips but had the gift of knowing where they would next be formed.

After a cordial reception at Council Bluffs, where the usual quota of passengers disembarked, the *Omaha* pursued her course up the sinuous Missouri. It was remarkable that after passing the mouth of the Platte no more ice was encountered on the trip to Sioux City although the weather was extremely cold. On the seventeenth of April the packet arrived at Blackbird Hills in the Omaha Indian Reserve where a large delegation of the tribe visited the steamer. They were anxiously looking for their agent and were not a little incensed to learn that he was not on board.

To conciliate the savages Captain Wineland pre-

sented them with a large barrel of hard biscuit scraps which was borne ashore in triumph by two stalwart braves named White Cow and Lone Buffalo. The feast was distributed in a unique manner. Very dexterously and with the utmost nonchalance, White Cow picked up an old iron skillet with an amputated handle, filled it with biscuit scraps, and emptied them into his capacious blanket. This process was repeated by the other Indians and they permitted the boat to depart, well satisfied with their work.

Then ensued days of battling with the ever-increasing force of the current in the upper reaches of the river. After passing Omaha, fire-wood became scarcer and of poorer quality so that much time was spent with the *Omaha* tied up to the bank while the crew cut wood. There was a current joke among river men which illustrates the immense amount of wood required for fuel by these packets. A steamer was once pulling against a strong current when the fuel gave out. Instead of tying up to the bank, there being nothing to tie to, the captain kept the engine going. When over a hundred cords of wood had been loaded they turned to proceed up stream, only to find that the whole amount had been consumed in holding the boat to the bank.

About noon on Friday, May 8th, the forty-fifth day out, the *Omaha* hove in sight of the straggling village of Sioux City. Long before she reached the levee the whole population — merchants, townsmen,

women, children, Indians, and dogs — gathered at the river to answer the *Omaha's* guns with a similar salute. No wonder. This was the first time their eyes had been gladdened by the sight of a steamboat for seven months. The *Omaha* had been the last boat down in the previous season, having left Sioux City on October 11, 1858. During the winter there had been no opportunity to replenish the stock of goods in the local stores. All spring the merchants had advertised that fresh supplies would be on board the first steamboat to arrive, and here at last was the *Omaha*, the faithful Sioux City packet, laden with groceries, farm implements, and, most important of all, mining tools.

The crew of the *Omaha* had a reputation for being very businesslike. Remembering that "time is money" all hands set to work with a will and in less than five hours over one hundred tons of freight had been unloaded, fifty tons of potatoes and corn taken on board, twenty-two passengers accommodated, of whom fifteen were ladies, all accounts had been settled, and the *Omaha* had turned her prow southward for the long journey to St. Louis.

This voyage of the *Omaha* is especially significant on account of the fact that the corn and potatoes taken on board were the first to be shipped down the river from Sioux City. In previous years the *Omaha* had carried these products to Sioux City. The event was indicative of the rapid development of the Missouri Valley, particularly in northwest

Iowa. J. Jewett Wilcox, the clerk of the *Omaha*, reported that no better corn or potatoes were grown in the whole Missouri Valley than in Woodbury County and in the rich valleys of the Big Sioux and Floyd rivers. On the return trip Captain Wineland took on board also a considerable quantity of earthenware manufactured at Dakota, a few miles south of Sioux City on the Nebraska side of the river. This was another article which had hitherto been transported in large quantities from St. Louis to the settlements up the river.

Running down stream was much easier, and by Sunday, May 10th, Omaha and Council Bluffs had been passed and the steamer tied up for the night at Bellevue, Nebraska. A number of passengers intended to transfer to the Hannibal and St. Joseph Railway at St. Joseph, but due to the unsavory reputation of that railroad at the time, they decided to complete the trip to St. Louis on the steamboat.

Just below Council Bluffs the *Omaha* met her first up-bound rival, and from there to St. Louis many others were encountered. The *Robert Campbell* passed on the twelfth of May at White Cloud where the *Omaha* loaded at the rate of "one dollar for coard". On May 13th she met a whole fleet of boats, each jammed with eager Pike's Peakers and heavily freighted with their outfits.

After an absence of fifty-two days, the *Omaha* dropped anchor at the St. Louis wharf on Friday, May 15th, having negotiated with safety a trip of

over twenty-one hundred miles on the most irresponsible river in the world. Thus the *Omaha*, and others of her kind, served in the settlement of the Missouri Valley and the development of the young towns in western Iowa before the railroads came to ruin the river traffic.

EDGAR A. HOLT